

JANET (PENNEY) BENNETT

Interviewed By: Jewell Fenzil Initial Interview Date: September 21, 1986

BENNETT: Should I say what my position. How I came into it?

Q: Well, yes.

BENNETT: I've come in (to the Foreign Service) over fifty, a person who lived a completely non-diplomatic life. Observed it occasionally from here and there at the odd cocktail party, and came into it as the wife of a consul general in a very social town at a time when we succeeded a very popular couple. There were a lot of expectations. My predecessor was a full time diplomatic wife. She came up through the system knowing it was a full time (volunteer) career for a woman. In fact, she didn't have a housekeeper. I think she used caterers, but she did the flower arrangements and that kind of thing herself. And she was active in a rather large number of associations in Melbourne which have components of American-Australian relations. She was interested and active in that. She was a great success and I've heard kind things about her ever since I got there.

I came from having my own job and my own life. I was single for about a year and I was learning to manage my own, and kind of enjoying that. I was a research assistant at Australian National University, in historical research. One of the things that was fun was working on the biography of Sir Robert Menzies. Melbourne was his world and suddenly, great fun for an historian, I was plunged into the midst of Robert Menzies' world. Going to his clubs and going to dinners at his addresses and meeting his friends and even his widow and his daughter, who is now a friend of mine. It really was like magic because every historian dreams of popping into the period you're studying, and there I was right in the middle of it. I was quite taken with being a part of the Melbourne scene for the three years that I'll be there. I took it on as a sort of fascinating three year period in my life and don't feel terribly upset or resentful, particularly at the kind of difficulties I encountered because I know that I don't have the whole lifetime career of it.

I understand a lot about how Foreign Service wives feel, but it isn't really my life in that sense. And I decided to do a thesis so that I would have some of my own world left to me while I did what Frank felt was necessary. That's been sometimes difficult-to figure out exactly what is necessary and what is optional. We work it out together. In the beginning he made the decisions, and suddenly I reached a point about four months after I got there when I had a health breakdown, probably cumulative over the whole drama of my last three years. (Narrator's first husband, David Penney, died.) It just seemed that I didn't have a choice about whether I went to an event or not. There was some medical treatment, but very minor. The main thing in the recovery, which was quick, was that I just said no to a couple of things.

But what hit me when I first got to Melbourne was this. Living in a university world where there are a lot of liberated ladies, some of them very strident, some of them quite well adapted to the changes that are going on with women now. The expectations of the Department of State are anachronistic. A guy who's bright and energetic and vital is going to marry, presumably, if he has his way about it, a woman of similar character. But that sort of woman these days just doesn't make a full time career out of husband support and the Department expects to have it that way. They say they don't, but they do.

I mean, the house has to have flowers arranged and its got to have beautiful decor. You've got to have a lot of domestic skills. You've got to dress well, and to cook. Learn what kind of food is stylish here and there and so on. You have to present everything well. But at the same time you are supposed to be able to bring something intelligent to the encounters. For one thing you have to be able to chat up people of very high achievement, attainment, and their wives. But you don't sit next to their wives at dinner. You have to learn how to talk to the Japanese consul general. We spend a lot of time together, he and I. We've spent many dinners sitting side by side because our rank is commensurate. And he is a terrific guy, but if I didn't have anything but domestic chit-chat to talk about, it would be hard going, I think.

Q: In other words, you have to maintain a balance between the demands of the spouse of the principal officer and maintain your own interests and identity so you have something to offer as a diplomatic wife.

BENNETT: Sure. Another thing, if you haven't got enough background you can't absorb information as you chat people up, as you "work the room," as I learned that's how they phrase it. You learn how to operate at a cocktail party, which was new to me. I hadn't been to a cocktail party, more or less out of choice, for a long, long time. I've learned how to do that, and other skills along the way. But if you haven't got enough background, you miss a lot of things.

I think, in fact, you can serve quite a useful information gathering role too, or perspective gathering role, as much as information. I don't try to elicit information from people, but I do try to bring a perspective. And sometimes just by asking a seemingly innocent question, people will open all kinds of things that they may not open up if the questions are too learned. Yet, you have to know what you're getting into, and that's tricky.

Q: That was part of the fun of the game. The Japanese consul general will tell you things over a dinner party that he might not tell Frank in an office.

BENNETT: It's not that he's going to reveal anything that he oughtn't. It's just that it might not occur to him that he is letting down his guard with me. Not necessarily my Japanese consul general. I'm making it sound like he's a particular case. Most of Frank's colleagues assume that Frank would bring a certain level of knowledge to an encounter, but the assumptions are not the same for me. So they might explain more fully, or with a different slant, something that they would be perfectly willing to talk with Frank about, but it mightn't come up in the same way. That's all I'm saying.

Anyway, that's one aspect of the strangeness of the role: the State Department really does want you to be available. I can't take a job. There's no way I can take a job and be a full time Foreign Service wife at the same time. Because I would take that job seriously. If there's a CODEL (congressional delegation) through or a fashion lunch to raise money for the American Women's Auxiliary (which contributes about \$50,000.00 a year to the local children's hospital) I have to go. I'm a patroness of the organization. The reason I'm a patroness is because they have functions at our house, I know that full well. Still, I wouldn't want the organizations and the consular office to not be in harmony, because we are. So that requires me to be free during the day sometimes, which means that you have to find something to do that will work in with the ambassador's visit, or a roving ambassador's visit, or a CODEL, or one of these local functions that are important. I do try to do the minimum of that, and we work out which ones matter.

Q: So your career has really become the volunteer pastime that you fit in with Frank's career. I see no alternative to that, do you?

BENNETT: Not the way it's structured. Not when the Department expects an input from the wives. I can see a useful input from the wives. But the Department has to recognize that that's what they're asking us to do. They have to know.

Q: There were two movements...one was compensation for senior spouses and that fell by the way when Marlene Eagleburger left the Foreign Service and left Washington. And there was another one called the Foreign Service Associates proposal, creating positions for spouses in and outside the mission and calling them associates. Well, the Department does that to some extent-in the mission, at least-but there is no associates' program.

BENNETT: I was offered a job. It's a sort of mickey mouse thing. I could have investigated educational opportunities for diplomatic families and written a report, or something like that. But I don't know if it was paid, I really didn't look into it. One of the other wives was eager to do it.

Q: Yes, sometimes there is contract work. But, do you feel as a spouse, with the silent expectations...really, no one tells you that you have to do these things. But they are there to be done and I think women, principally, do them in good faith because they need to be done. Do you think you should be compensated for that?

BENNETT: I don't think you can really compensate. I feel there are certain financial problems and I was going to bring that up. I don't know if they relate directly. Everything's indirect. But, for instance, I had been a research assistant and an academic wife for twenty years, living in a smaller environment and not on the circuit. And I'm suddenly expected to attend functions in good clothes, and I didn't have them. I had to buy them myself. Melbourne isn't a cheap place and I don't believe I'm a clothes horse at all, but I would have to go buy ball gowns, jackets, different sorts of casts and dresses-previously I didn't wear dresses-cocktail things, good shoes, bags, all that sort of thing. I've spent quite a lot of money of my own on clothes, and I won't need them at the end of the three years. I wouldn't use anything like as many ever again. I felt that it was a bit unfair that I had to do that myself. I actually am a middle market shopper. I don't go for high fashion or anything of that sort. I think it's good that I don't from the point of view of the other wives. I don't really think it's a good style to set, but I really was in need of an awful lot of clothes when I took this on. That was one financial problem.

Q: In this case, I think you're the exception rather than the rule. One of the great pluses of the Foreign Service is that...

BENNETT: You can recycle things over and over again.

Q: Yes. You buy, as you say, upper middle market. Good classic clothes. I'm still wearing a jacket from the 1960s! You are something of an exception.

BENNETT: It just happened to be my problem. It's a very fashion conscious city. I just never lived in a place like that before or went to those kinds of things. So that was a problem that I particularly faced. Another problem is the rigidities of the budgeting, mainly that the ORE (Official Residence Expenses) can't be transferred to representation. That's been a severe strain at times because, first of all, the embassy often does not reimburse us for three or four months. And that is several thousand dollars that we are out of pocket personally, waiting for repayment. That has caught us short sometimes, when Frank has actually had to take out a loan to put on a cocktail party because somebody is coming through who must be entertained. I think that's being looked into. We were being paid through Bangkok, or something crazy like that, and it just took a long time. If somebody's on leave for a month, that means the papers don't get attended to and we're actually short sometimes.

Q: If you have exceeded your representational budget are there more funds? Has Frank asked for more funds?

BENNETT: I don't know.

Q: He should ask, because when we were in Recife we always found that there were unused funds in Brasilia.

BENNETT: In our case, the ambassador paid out of his own pocket. And a couple of times, when he came to Melbourne, we were able to tap his representational funds for the functions. So between his personal generosity and his liberality with his entertainment funds from Canberra, we managed to cope. The time that we were caught out for such a long time was because of a long leave.

Q: Your ambassador is an independently wealthy political appointee?

BENNETT: And dedicated as anything. He's fantastic, he's bright.

Q: That's wonderful. The point I am about to make is that you can't count on that with a career ambassador who may not-who obviously does not-have the funds.

BENNETT: Another thing that happened was, for instance, we had to give a number of parties at a time when my housekeeper wasn't there. So we had to hire caterers. I mean it was just a jam up of events when we had important visitors and had to entertain important people, and I had just arrived. To get a caterer adequate to do that job we had to pay quite a lot of money and that just blew the budget. We hadn't been having a housekeeper for two months, but the money we did not pay her for two months was lost to us forever. We had to really dip in heavily and deplete our entertainment allowance and I thought that was ridiculous.

I was cranky about that because under the circumstances in a first world country basically you can't get servants easily. And if you have to hire, the ORE pays the servants and the other comes out of another fund and you can't transfer. It seems to me under certain applications that could be more flexible. I don't know how they could do it, but it seems a bit crazy, from my own point of view, coming in as I do at this level, unreasonable. So in fact we just blew the budget.

It was a good party, politically very successful. It was a chance for the ambassador to meet a cabinet minister, the vice chancellor of the university and the governor at the residence. Because of the dodgy politics in our state, which is a Labor government, it isn't always politic for the political leaders of the state to be seen in public with the American officials, although they are perfectly willing and happy to meet then, and in this case I think they were pleasantly surprised about the set of attitudes. I think it was really successful. But, you know, it was ridiculous that a public servant couple had to go through a lot of financial strain in order to do what is in fact good representation. I don't think that all representational things are all that useful, but that one was. It shouldn't be a worry to either Frank or me or anybody. Of the representational things, the only ones that I have my doubts about are some of the cocktail parties.

Q: That you give or go to?

BENNETT: A bit of both, though we don't give too many. But it's a problem for us. One of the anachronisms in our situation is that a lot of clubs that were formed, for instance the Australian American Association, shortly after World War II when there was a lot of warmth and feeling about the allied relationship during the war-the rescue by the Americans-and there's a great residue of good feeling there which you don't want to lose now that there are strains on the relationship. Because of wheat and the [military] bases, and because of being a nuclear target, there's a lot of strong anti-American feeling.

Q: In other words, times have changed.

BENNETT: And the people who are loyal friends were formed at a time when the relationship was good, was different. And Australia didn't have the same kind of strengths and some of the weaknesses, I think. Anyway, what we end up doing is spending a great deal of time with people who are of marginal interest now to the Australian/American relationship. We need to be able to refocus on people who are going to be more central.

Q: You need to be able to prioritize.

BENNETT: Yes, that's right. Well, we've had a few really good ones lately. The young Fabians asked if they could hear the American view of the disarmament process. A political officer from Canberra came down and we had the young Fabians, we thought, it turned out to be young Labor, (the Labor movement is very complex in our state.) This is a fairly conservative Labor group of young people. About fifty turned out. They were fighting for places. And they'd had a ring around, bless their hearts, 'what shall we wear to the Consulate?' You know, I thought it was going to be a fairly strident group of youngsters who maybe were going to make some position statements and get the ear of the Americans. Sometimes that's what happens at things like this, where this is my big chance to give them a blast and so they come in with their questions, quote, unquote, and it's really a twenty minute series of three questions disguised as a position paper. But this wasn't. They were brilliantly polite. They were terrific. And because it was in the house and because we had a nice big supper, there were lots of young kids. And they ranged from postal employees and mechanics to graduate students, right around the range. And they were concerned questions and good questions and the guy handled it beautifully. And I thought, okay, this is where you should put your energy, I mean, these people are the up and coming people in the relationship. They're going to be in politics. They came away, they were very articulate about their feeling that no other country would have let them talk and let them meet and hear this issue. You know, it was really a terrific function. I don't feel the least bit of irritation about turning out a supper and organizing my life to do this. I think it's just what we're there for and I think it's terrific.

Q: What would happen if Frank said to one of these old guard organizations that's a hold over from post-World War II, what would happen if Frank said no to one of them?

BENNETT: He's gotten himself in trouble because all they want to do is have a Halloween party and a Fourth of July party and a Thanksgiving party. They want to celebrate all the American national days. A lot of young Americans who live there for whatever reason, maybe they've married an Australian, or they've gone into business there, or they've left the foreign service and live there. There are a lot of people like that. And they love it. But it's the old guard who don't want to make it anything but a social club. Frank was suggesting, why didn't they contribute to a fund for, like an American who's stuck, who is ill, why can't we have a few thousand dollars on hand to help people.

Q: Any American who is destitute in Australia is a long way from home.

BENNETT: That's right. He met a guy for instance, who had been in show business, who was out there and he had cancer and he had no support system whatsoever. He didn't need much, but he needed something, two or three thousand dollars. He thought, why couldn't this kind of group, which is really about Americans being in Australia, why couldn't they set up a fund for emergencies to be administered in some way that is satisfactory to them. No way. We're a social group. They wouldn't do it. So, he's trying to get these groups to...

Q: Bring them up into the here and now.

BENNETT: Bring these groups a bit up to date. Give them a contemporary purpose. The one that's really successful and we give a lot of support to is the American Women's Auxiliary. It's a wives group of the old style, the kind the State Department seems to think people all live like. But they do raise a lot of money for the children's hospital. They do it through giving parties. The women also volunteer to work in the hospital and so on. It's a very successful relationship with Australian women and there are a lot of fine Australian women involved in it too. I'm very proud that I'm patroness of that. It's not my scene exactly. But I'm happy to...

Q: But you feel that its worthwhile.

BENNETT: Very definitely.

Q: What about charities? We were constantly, when Guido was at the consulate in Recife, constantly every charity, every gallery opening, every this and every that, I have in the basement a cardboard carton of the invitations over three and a half years. I just saved everything to show, in a way what demands are made on you. And ours was a tiny post. Do you get invitations to all of the galleries, all the debutante balls and all that sort of thing?

BENNETT: No, not really. I don't know what its like under a Liberal government. I suspect there's a lot closer relationship with government and Americans under a Liberal government. Liberal is a capital 'L' and its the conservative party. It takes a bit of cultivation to have access to government when its a Labor government and you're Americans, but its working and we're doing fine. As far as galleries and all that, yes, they come. We haven't gone to such a lot, actually. I don't find that a particularly big strain. The one thing that we have to go to that I don't particularly like at all are the national days cocktail parties. I find those a bore. I find the demands of the consular corps are tiresome and not particularly useful from the point of view of representation.

Q: Right, because they're little rats like we are, looking for information.

BENNETT: They're just scratching each others' backs. They go to each others' parties and its exacerbated. The professional corps isn't all that big and we enjoy getting together with them and I think its probably not a bad way to touch base from time to time to go to each others' things. There are also a number of 'national day' functions held by honorary consuls for countries with relatively little business in Melbourne. So I go to about every third one. I decided to play the role of the smiling eccentric. Just going to the University is eccentric enough, so I just smile a lot. I just hope I get away with it. It's a bit of a struggle those parties. Most of the time we're very lucky. We get to meet a lot of fascinating people and I love it.

Q: At least you're doing this in English. To do it in a foreign language, you get used to it, but the first couple of times I would come home, I would be so mentally wrung out, that I couldn't sleep. Because you're, especially with Portuguese, trying to listen and trying to contribute.

BENNETT: Did you speak Portuguese?

Q: And learned quickly, because we had to use it socially. Using a language to buy bread and give instructions to your servants is one thing, but taking it into the cocktail circuit is something else again. Really, its quite a difference. Let me switch to something else. In another two years you'll leave Melbourne; Frank may retire; may come back to the United States. Or he could go on to another post, or he could stay in the Department. How do you see your career in this context? You do have a portable, what we call a portable career. You can do historical research anywhere. Anywhere you've got a good English library.

BENNETT: Well, not anywhere. I need a city.

Q: Yes. Well, you'll have that in Washington.

BENNETT: So, we could look at that. Well, if Frank were to be offered an ambassadorship, he wouldn't want to go unless it were someplace where he has already had certain interest and a stake. And since it just happens that when I met him first, it was a place we had in common anyway. The sorts of posts that Frank would consider irresistible, I would consider fine. If he were offered an ambassadorship to someplace in Southeast Asia that we both know, well, I'd be glad to go. I'd find it interesting. And I've been doing my thesis on migrant studies and I could probably do something or other on the other side of migrant studies. I could imagine getting myself...

Q: Where they leave from.

BENNETT: Yes, writing something from the other side of the story. And continuing with what I'm doing my thesis on if we were to go to someplace in Southeast Asia. But if we were to be sent to, I don't know, Africa or somewhere, I think we probably wouldn't take it. That's just the way it looks at the moment. Coming back to Washington, I intend to finish my thesis when I get back here anyway. So the time in Washington I look forward to very much. I've never lived in Washington and I think it would be terrific and I think one could spend a whole year just going to museums in this place and never be bored a minute.

Q: We just did. That's just what we've done.

BENNETT: When I went to the Smithsonian, I said, I would like a year to spend three or four hours a day in here and learn. I think its fascinating. I don't mind at all leaving for a year and a half to live in Washington. But where we finish up is a big problem because I've spent twenty years in Australia and eight years in and out of Southeast Asia so coming to the United States is not something I'm absolutely sure I want to do.

Q: And you'd be leaving one child behind.

BENNETT: And leave a child behind. And leave my home, basically. Not only my physical piece of real estate, which is...

Tape Interrupted

Q: ...she's the head of the Foreign Service Women's Association. It's so interesting to me, your reaction coming right in...

BENNETT: Off the deep end, cold turkey.

Q: I mean just plunging right in as a professional woman, totally new to this, you're reacting to it exactly as a great percentage of women react to it who have been in the business all along. And really, virtually, the only difference is the fact that they have some sort of wardrobe. Well, they don't necessarily always have the wardrobe, because sometimes ... We have a friend who went from Iceland to Cameroon or vice versa. They do give us, there is a climate allowance. It won't even buy a suit anymore, unless they've upped it significantly too.

BENNETT: The French Consul General's wife gets money to buy particularly French clothes because that's part of their representation. She's the only one that I know of. She is given enough money to buy a few outfits to represent France's style. I don't know whether Americans can be bothered with that. I don't think it's necessary.

Q: No, I've thought of this and I'd wondered how I could do it and of course I never did anything about it. All the money that we waste over at the State Department on useless things. Somebody over there should be building up a good rapport with Seventh Avenue, with the garment district in New York. We should be able to go up and buy Halstons and Anne Klein and we should be able to buy American designers. I don't think anyone has ever focused on that.

BENNETT: At least at a big discount or something so there's some kind of a representation. So when we go to a cocktail party or a ball. I mean the Fourth of July Ball, why should I have to fork out \$400 to go to the Fourth of July Ball which is a duty party, but I had to actually spend, by the time I got the shoes and the business together, it cost me several hundred dollars to go to that Ball. It's not a dress I would normally want to have. It's alright for the men, they go out in their suit, they wear one suit and they wear it forever. Four hundred dollars is not a lot of money for a dress these days.

Q: I'm surprised you didn't spend more, frankly.

BENNETT: Well, the ball dress I wore the first time cost me \$200. I was really lucky. I try to buy things at sales. A lot of the women in Melbourne can go to second hand boutiques. There's a couple of terrific boutiques, and when I leave I'll go there, but I can't do that because I'll walk straight into the home of the lady who left it off at the boutique. Unless it's a real standard item, I would really find that a bit daunting. I don't think that's really the right way to go. I'm a bit careful about what I do there. I don't buy a lot of stuff there. Actually I only bought second hand shoes there and had them dyed. It's a consideration, if you're so up front as I am in this particular thing. I mean you have to go to fashion show lunches. God, what do you wear to fashion show lunches? I don't know. I've never been to one ever before. I'll just have to wing it. Anyway enough about clothes.

Q: What about, well you may be getting into the purchase of a new house and everything, and the move and everything. That also is going to be an infringement of your time. Do you feel that's worthwhile?

BENNETT: Yes, I find if I don't go to look at the houses, nobody thinks to ask whether there's any laundry facilities, or, for example, whether the only really comfy, big, cosy room in this very American, basically American setup, Australia is so similar that it's, you might as well compare them. A couple of houses that the administrative officer wanted us to get, the only spacious, elegant room in the house was the family room which was built on to this place and it was right next to the kitchen and guess who dominates the kitchen? My cook. So Frank and I wouldn't really have a place to go that's the kind of place you want to put your khakis on and watch a tape and read the paper and have your drink before dinner is going to be the one where you can't help but be on intimate terms with the help. And I don't want it. If I don't go along on the house hunt, sometimes that slips right through the net. Those kind of things, lots of features have to be looked at from, I'm the only person who's actually spending all day there, with the way it's functioning. The real estate agent certainly isn't going to point out that the laundry facilities are straight back in Dickens, where the entrance hall is beautiful. So, I find I have to go on these house hunts and we've spent because of American government procedures, don't go at all well together with the way the market functions in Melbourne. Most of these sorts of houses go at auction. The owner of the house can put in two dummy bidders, so that's very difficult. It's a difficult situation for the government. We've lost a lot of houses because their procedures aren't flexible enough.

Q: That should be illegal. I'm sure that would be illegal here.

BENNETT: Oh, I know. And it ought to be illegal too, the way the real estate agents keep on telling us that so-and-so has bid more than we have and we didn't say well, we don't have any more, gee, sorry, we lost that one. And then they come back and we find privately because of our other connections that the owner's furious that we haven't rebid. It is just a real game there. The problem is that we've spent now eight months house hunting. And we try to work it so it doesn't eat into too much time, but it really does. You have to spend a whole morning every few weeks looking at houses and keeping it straight. I devised a sort of a check list, because we were getting confused. Is that the one where the garden is big or the pool is too small to swim in or it had a tennis court or whatever. There are certain needs that we tried to make a weighted priority and sort of check list we could go over. I think that is something that the Department could even work on, is how to do that. I don't know if they buy a lot of houses, but it was something we had to sit there and work out finally because we were getting so confused as to what features we valued. I have a different valuation than the admin(istrative) officer. He looks at security and to whether the gutters are rotten, and I look at whether there's a room for me to have a study. And he's not concerned about that at all. The other problem of course is with security, with terrorists. One of the things that costs more is a house with enough grounds to do something on. We've been told by the local police we shouldn't go on our evening walks, which is how we get exercise.

Q: Do you have guards?

BENNETT: We had for a while, a couple of the local police department men when they find it worthwhile. They have their intelligence naturally, and they're very good. They had a 'round-the-clock police car sitting out in front of our house for about a month, but then they decided for some reason to take it off. I guess they talked to our security officer, but not to us particularly. But they had asked us not to go on our evening walks, which was terrific. Where we lived was wonderful walking, and we loved it. You don't have to change clothes and get into a car and drive and belong to club to walk, you just go and do it. So I was hoping we could get a house with a tennis court, because that would give us A) very good political access, because a lot of the politicians and so on that we would like to see, would play tennis with us, where they mightn't do a lot of other things. And we could have a tennis party on Saturday and it would be off-hand and fun and we could say every Saturday afternoon we can invite everyone to tennis. It would also provide a place to exercise. But we can't have the tennis court because procedures blocked us a super house for that. I'm a bit tired of it all. I really don't care at this point whether the U.S. government has the sort of house they really ought to have or not anymore. My eight months of enthusiasm has disappeared. I think we're going to get a house that isn't as good as it should be just because of procedures. [n.b. Ms. Bennett later added: Re-reading this transcript after one year, I feel constrained to report that eventually an excellent house was purchased, which after minor alterations on the house and our use of it, has proved to be an improvement.]

Q: I finally gave up and we just stayed in the place. We had not wanted to move into an apartment because in Recife there wasn't an apartment building that didn't have elevator problems, so on these national days you'd have a line going up and a line coming down and Guido wasn't going to have that. I found a house that had been rented by the consulate before and the embassy wouldn't take it. It was perfect. So I finally just gave up because everything that I would find they would find something wrong with. Mainly it was too expensive and it was much less than they were paying for rent in Brasilia.

BENNETT: That's what happened to me. The house that Frank and I both loved very much and I was so excited when I walked through. I thought its historically fascinating, its been recently done up, it had attractive, low care grounds with plenty of space for outdoor entertaining, but with no care. It was just beautifully done with beautiful flowering bushes in the beds and a wide brick front. We could have had a party in the front. We could have had His Majesty drive up to the front. It was elegant and casual, just the way Americans ought to present. It would have done us very proud. It was less at that time than the house that they're looking at now which is not adequate. It was really because the administrative officer found two or three bits that needed repainting. I would have painted it myself, I was so excited about it. I would have put up with the inconvenience of moving out. We would like them to rebuild the house that we are in. There has been a plan, an architect's plan. It's been approved by FBO. It's the most elegant, wonderful house and its in the perfect location. It would have taken about a half of a million dollars to rebuild it, plus, of course, moving the Bennetts out to a nice apartment so that we could still function, plus moving us back in. I grant that. However, you'll never get that real estate again, its gone. It is absolutely choice, centrally located. One function we give, for example, every year at Labor Day we invite Labor leaders and business leaders and political people involved in the labor question, the industrial relations, which is very central to Australian politics. They come to this party and they told me, both business people and labor leaders, that it is the one occasion they met without an agenda was at our house. Now that's important. But, because we're right in town and its big we can have a hundred people there in the house comfortably, they come. And they like talking to one another there because they don't have any issues, they just meet as two people or five people or a hundred people right across the board in that particular area. Which is very important politically. Now it may not be of direct significance. We don't accomplish anything, in quotes, for the American government at that function, except that its tremendous goodwill and its a place where they must think, well, I can see them at the American's place, and we might talk about it. Whatever it is that's bothering them. It's, I think, one of the better functions we do. And yet, its not going to be anything like, we're going to be further out, its going to be smaller, and I don't think its going to be as convenient. They may stop by on their way home from work for these things, and they may not. It's not as good of a location. We've lost that. And I think its a big mistake.

Q: That's exactly what we did in Recife. The opposition leaders would meet at our house, right in town, come from the office, no fuss, no feathers. Meet with the people down from Washington, or whoever. You're absolutely right there are so many parallels.

BENNETT: When you've got an important consulate, you see your Brazil situation is paralleled in the Australian one because the embassy is in an artificial capital and the town we live in is actually the business center. It's very important for the labor movement and its very important for the military. We have a lot of military entertaining. And the house is appropriate. I think also, a town where people have spent all their lives, they know the real estate. I have few friends in the "top" families in Melbourne that I play tennis with and they have been fascinated by my big house hunt. Those ladies know what those houses are, what they're worth. If America goes down substantially in their presentation of where they are, everyone in town is going to know. "Do you know that the Americans bought a house worth ta-da-da-da." The British have a better house. The Japanese have a better house and we're going to have a worse house. I think its going to be noticed. I think they're going to take it as an indication of the lower valuation of our representation there. This has come from, to some extent, from the people in Canberra who live in an artificial capital. I lived there myself for twenty years and I love it, so its not anti-Canberra. I'm not. I know now that you can get to the point where you think that the Commonwealth, the federal government, in capital and what they do is the main thing. And what's going on in, in fact cities ten times this size, is not the main thing. This gets reflected in the way they allocate funds for what we're doing, and I'm sure in Sydney. Our situation is even more peculiar because Sydney consulate only represents New South Wales, our's represents South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, and the Northern Territory. If they get the feeling that that post isn't so valued, that's going to be reflected in the attitude of the military, and business community, and the labor movement, all of which is centered in Victoria. I just think they're making a big mistake. I think the house issue is an important one.

Q: Is there anything we haven't covered?

BENNETT: I don't think so.

Q: I thank you. I think its going to be a very valuable tape.

BENNETT: Maybe a bit rambling.

Q: No, it isn't rambling at all.

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Frank C. Bennett Jr.

Spouse entered Service: 1957Left Service:You entered Service: 1985

Status: Spouse of Consul GeneralPosts:

1985-88Melbourne, Australia

Date and place of birth: Seattle, Washington - May 1, 1934

Maiden Name: Linden

Parents:

Robert F. Linden, magazine Wholesaler for N.W. and Alaska

Schools:

Roosevelt Hight School, Seattle

Stanford University

Date and place of marriage: Canberra, A.C.T. Australia - September 7, 1985

Profession: Historical Researcher

Children:

Daughter, 28, married and living in Melbourne

Son, 26, married and living in Boston

End of interview